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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000836

SIPDIS

FOR EUR/CARC

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN'S 2008 ELECTION: ISLAM UNLIKELY TO
INFLUENCE ELECTION RESULTS

REF: BAKU 00779

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: According to local contacts, Islam is unlikely to be a significant political factor during the October 15 presidential election. Our contacts told us that while Islam is growing as a religious, cultural, and social phenomenon, there is little political space for appeals to religion in the current political and social climate. Azerbaijani law also lays the basis for the GOAJ preventing appeals to Islam in the political sphere. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) This cable is part of a series on the broader political environment before the October 15 presidential election. Septels address the media environment and the potential for large-scale demonstrations.

¶3. (C) According to a variety of local Embassy contacts, Islam is unlikely to be a significant political factor during the election season. Former State Committee on Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA) employee Agil Khajiyev said that while Islam is rapidly growing as a religious, cultural, and social phenomenon, there are few opportunities for any religion to play a political role in the upcoming election. Practicing Muslim and civic society activist Fuad Aliyev quickly discarded the prospects for Islam becoming a political issue during the election. Aliyev argued that the Ministry of National Security (MNS) or another GOAJ entity would quickly quash any attempt by political or religious forces to politicize Islam during the election.

¶4. (C) Rashid Hajili, who heads the Media Rights Institute, told the Embassy that because the election is just one electoral contest and given President Ilham Aliyev's near certitude of victory, there is little to no chance for Islam to assume a political role. Hajili did note that Islam could be a factor in the 2010 parliamentary elections, particularly as more Azerbaijanis are practicing Muslims and the parliamentary elections by nature are more decentralized races forcing candidates to adopt more grass-roots campaigning tactics.

¶5. () Azerbaijan's constitution separates religion from the state (article 18). Azerbaijan's Law on Religious Freedom also forbids religious associations from participating in political parties' activities (article five). While there are inherent legal grey areas concerning an individual presidential candidate's ability to articulate his/her own private religious views, in practice, the GOAJ likely would rely on these two laws to clamp down on any candidate seeking to make religion a political issue.

16. (C) The Embassy does not expect that Islam will become an issue or shaping factor in the October 15 presidential election. Incumbent Ilham Aliyev is staunchly secular, and he is widely anticipated to win the election. None of the other candidates thus far has made religious appeals to advance their campaign and there have been no Islamic parties enjoying broad-based support to contest the election. The Islamic Party of Azerbaijan has existed since the mid-1990s, but it lacks registration and it has a very limited following among the general public. The GOAJ is unlikely to allow the party to function effectively, especially since it lacks registration. The Embassy also notes that the recent bombing of the Abu Bakr mosque in Baku does not appear to have any link to the presidential election (reftel). Since the bombing, the GOAJ has arrested several suspects and banned Muslims from praying outside of several popular mosques in Baku, but these events do not appear linked to the election.

17. (C) While Islam is unlikely to have a short-term political impact, Azerbaijani society -- especially the youth -- increasingly is showing an interest in Islam. This cultural shift is primarily seen at the religious and cultural levels. It would be illogical for this cultural shift not to have some long-term political implications. If public discontent with growing corruption, economic disparities, and a lack of "social justice" deepens in the absence of serious political and economic reform, it could lay the foundation for a more serious political movement.

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Significant restraints on Islam assuming a political character remain, however, as the general public favors a strict separation of religion and politics and the pool of secular ruling elites will employ all available means to maintain the status quo.
DERSE